Binukot: Revisiting Western Visayas' only indigenous group

Centuries ago a tribe in the mountains of Tapaz, in the then town of Capiz had a rather strange practice that bordered on the mystical; they kept the most beautiful female offspring in their families hidden from sunlight until the day of her betrothal. For the entire time that she remained in the darkness of a room in their hut, food and drink was brought to her and the tribes-folk believed that this gave her the magical powers of a babaylan. Whenever the farms were being readied for planting in the uplands, the young sunlight-deprived lass is taken out to dance and chant in the fields under the moonlight, to ensure an abundant harvest. As would be expected, Binukot women are very good epic chanters having the longest recorded epic in the country of over thirty hours. In no time, the entire tribe became known for this practice of hiding their beautiful females from sunlight, locally known as 'bukot', and hence, the word 'binukot' which means 'to hide' or to 'keep'.

The Spaniards used to call this tribe the 'Mundo' tribe which was taken from the Spanish word 'vagamundo' meaning fierce, uncivilized, or wild. After the colonial era, because of the negative connotation of the word, they came to be known as the 'Bukidnons' or the people from the uplands. The name again evolved into 'sulod' meaning 'interior', and now into 'Panayanon Sulud' or the 'Suludnon' roughly meaning 'those from the interiors of Pan-ay.

The Suludnon are believed to have descended from the migrating Indonesians coming from Mainland Asia. Later settling on the headwaters, their ancestors could have followed the course of the Pan-ay River; because of their planting custom known as 'kaingin' some moved into the interiors. During the Spanish colonization, they were joined in the mountains by those who refused to submit to Spanish authority. They look just like ordinary Filipino Christians with an average built, fair skin, straight hair, and dark brown or black eyes. As is customary, and perhaps because of their 'binukot' tradition, the women have developed a passion for beauty wearing jewelry made from Spanish coins strung together called biningkit, a waistband of coins called a wakus, and a headdress of coins known as a pundong. Like some tribes in Central Africa and some parts of the Philippines, they also adorn their bodies with tattoos and file their teeth.

The men, on the other hand, as is expected in most indigenous tribes, have a penchant for valor. They went around wearing bahag or loin cloths, carrying binalanban/bankaw or spears, parana or arrows, taming or shields, iwa/pakaw or daggers, sapaws or ceremonial swords, and talibong or bolos.

Suludnon families lived in houses built from hardwood pillars, cogon roofs, and the bark of trees or bamboo for their salug or floors. Inside the house, which is a one-room-affair, there would usually be a duyan or hammock, a lusong kag hal-o or mortar and pestle and a bamboo bench. When the weather becomes hostile and typhoons become a common occurrence, the Suludnon stay in their kurob or a storm shelter that is a low dwelling with the ground as the floor. An interesting practice of the Suludnon is to name their children according to their qualities or to insult rivals (e.g. Dapuan, Maaram, Hugdawan, Bangkuhan). Nowadays, the Suludnons have been given Christian names. They also have their version of the dowry known as the pangayo and the labor offering of the groom-to-be called panghagad. A burial practice that they still practice today is the interment of their dead under their houses.
True to the definitions of an indigenous group, the Suludnon also have their own arts and literature. They have oral lores still being sung today known as the dilot or love song, the talda or repartee, the ulawhay or the narrative chant, the ambahan or the extemporaneous welcome song, and the suguidanon or the epic. Interestingly, their epic deals with local mythical and cultural heroes, like Labaw Donggon and Humadapnon. They also have the Binanog which is a courtship dance imitating the movement of the hawk. Today, they still perform this dance to the tune of their very own musical instruments like the agong or gong, the tambur or a drum made of deerskin, and the subing which resembles a bamboo wind instrument. Other than making their own musical instruments, they are also very skilled at boat-building, weaving, wood carving, weapon embellishment and metal craft.

For years the Suludnon have been neglected; because of their very remote location in the mountains of Tapaz, they have no access to health care and fall victim to very curable diseases. Their art is dying because of a lack of support from the local governments and the lack of interest of many 'so-so' cultural groups in the Province of Capiz. As of writing time, the Suludnon are in dire need of attention. With ample resources and the assistance of skilled professionals in the field of culture, anthropology, and indigenous research, a full documentation-immersion trip could be conducted to preserve whatever is left of this tribe which is the only indigenous group in the whole of Western Visayas.

Treasures are not always what we perceive them to be; antique trinkets, relics, and precious heirlooms – indigenous groups are also national treasures. These tribes represent the ancient, pre-colonial Filipino and in their veins course the true indomitability and fervour of the Filipino spirit. If we don't begin to concern ourselves with the plight of our indigenous tribes we will have pronounced a death sentence for a culture that is already gasping for the air of professional attention and assistance. It takes a few simple steps to express concern for these indigenous groups and failing to take these steps would mean eventually letting go of something truly precious, truly priceless, truly beautiful – our Filipino heritage.

Be rational; be insane…every once in a while! TTFN!

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